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Gut-focused hypnotherapy protocol for functional gastrointestinal disorders

Background to the Manchester Protocol and rationale:

The intention behind the gut-focused approach to hypnotherapy is to give sufferers of functional gastrointestinal disorders such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) a degree of control over the function of their gastrointestinal system in order to improve their symptoms. Consequently, they need to understand how the normal digestive system works and what seems to go wrong in their condition. The depth of knowledge needed varies from patient to patient. Regardless of whether they have IBS (the most common disorder), functional dyspepsia or a functional esophageal disorder, it is important for patients to know that their condition is multifactorial and has multiple mechanisms involved in generating their symptoms, probably at different 'doses' in different individuals. The role of psychological factors in these conditions tends to be exaggerated and this should be put in perspective as many sufferers have been told it is 'all in their head'. Furthermore, some patients will think that the fact that they are being offered hypnotherapy confirms the notion that their condition is 'all psychological'. It is, therefore, important to emphasize that this type of hypnotherapy specifically targets the gastrointestinal system as well as having positive effects on psychological factors, and that is the reason why it is so effective.

The principal symptoms of IBS are abdominal pain, abdominal bloating or distension and an abnormality of bowel function. In addition, many patients suffer from a variety of other, non-colonic symptoms such as; low backache, constant lethargy, chest pain, nausea and bladder symptoms as well as gynecological problems in females. All of these symptoms, both gastrointestinal and non-gastrointestinal can be targeted by hypnosis and it is, therefore, useful for the therapist to know which ones a particular patient finds most bothersome so that suggestions about reducing their severity can be incorporated into hypnosis sessions.

Practical aspects of delivering gut-focused hypnotherapy:

For those readers not familiar with hypnosis it is important to realize that before trying to administer gut-focused hypnotherapy it is essential that a potential therapist has some formal training in hypnosis and that just reading the script detailed below to a patient is not sufficient. Contrary to popular belief it is not necessary for patients to be lying down and a comfortable chair is more than adequate.

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Treatment is typically delivered for one hour, at weekly intervals, with the number of sessions somewhat dependent on the severity of the functional gastrointestinal disorder. It is best for the first session to be devoted to education as detailed above and an explanation of what is involved in treatment. This provides an opportunity for the patient and therapist to get to know each other and for any misconceptions about hypnosis, of which there are many, to be dispelled. Furthermore, it is useful to establish what a patient finds relaxing, as what the therapist finds relaxing, for instance lying on a beach or hill walking, may not necessarily be the same for a patient. It is imperative that patients practice the technique and recordings are provided for this purpose. These can be of a session if the patient wishes, but this can be time consuming and a disincentive to practice. Consequently, a brief recording is also provided for the patient and these are individualized rather than generic, so that the patient is effectively taking the therapist home with them. The ultimate aim of treatment must be for the patient to be independent of the therapist once treatment is completed, although we do allow for the occasional 'top up' if a patient is going through a difficult time.

As a guide, we have provided an example of a gut-focused hypnotherapy script for IBS which can be gradually introduced once the patient has become familiar with the hypnotherapeutic process. However, it is important that this is only used as a guide, and the content of hypnotherapy sessions should be adapted to the individual patients symptoms and personal imagery of their condition to improve the chances of a successful outcome. In the example session below, visualization and several metaphors are used. It is useful to have feedback from the patient about which metaphors they find most useful. It has been found that, if asked, many patients have a personal image of their IBS and then this can be modified accordingly. It is common for anyone suffering from abdominal pain to rub their abdomen to try and relieve it or to place a hot water bottle on their abdomen. Consequently, to try and control the pain of IBS we find that asking a patient to put their hand on their abdomen and feel warmth often works well, with the warmth being used to relax the spasm. Imagining the gut as a river and adjusting the flow can be used as a way of controlling bowel function for either constipation or diarrhea. For instance, as a metaphor for diarrhea, picturing their gut as a fast flowing mountain stream with fast running broken water, and changing it to a smooth flowing river in a pleasant green valley. Alternatively, for constipation, imagining their gut as a stagnant slow moving river with lots of bends and removing the bends to make it flow much more easily with lovely clear clean water. Many patients report that bloating can feel like a balloon in the abdomen and this can then be deflated.

The emphasis so far has been on IBS, but other functional gastrointestinal disorders are equally amenable to hypnotherapy although obviously the metaphors need to be changed in order to control the perceived abnormality in the relevant anatomical region. For instance, in functional dyspepsia improving gastric emptying or accommodation, and in non-cardiac chest

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pain reducing esophageal spasm or sensitivity. For example, gastric emptying might be improved by imagining a slow running sink being improved by widening the plughole. Alternatively, accommodation might be improved by thinking of the stomach wall as being elasticated rather than rigid. With regard to the esophagus if it feels inflamed, the patient can be asked to think of drinking a cool soothing liquid, perhaps white in color or even containing a local anesthetic. The gut can be oversensitive in many patients (hypersensitivity) and strategies to control this can be introduced, such as using a metaphor to block pain signals travelling up the spinal cord to whichever area of the gastrointestinal system is involved in the patient's condition.

The hypnotic repertoire is remarkably simple and limited, with the repetition of key suggestions over and over again being very important. Famous orators often repeat key messages three times in the same sentence and this technique can be used very effectively in hypnotherapy. For instance: 'you are going to get better and better and better' or 'your mind is going to get stronger and stronger and stronger'. The therapist should speak quietly and slowly making the tone of their voice as relaxing as possible. As a session progresses it is often worth emphasizing certain concepts by saying a particular word in a more assertive tone so it takes on greater importance for the patient. For instance: 'your mind can control anything'. Depending on what has emerged at the initial session, it terms of what mechanisms might be involved in symptom generation in a particular patient and their most bothersome symptoms, the sessions can be designed accordingly.

Each session of hypnotherapy finishes with reinforcement of what has gone before and the inclusion of a post hypnotic suggestion that the patient will continue to improve after the session is over and that this will be facilitated by constant practice with the aid of their recording.

Hypnotherapy and pharmacological treatments:

Hypnotherapy should not be regarded as a standalone treatment and if a patient improves on top of what they are already achieving with medication this can still be regarded as a good outcome. As a patient improves during hypnotherapy, they may find that they need less of any 'as required' medication. For instance antidiarrheal may be needed less often or even discontinued but it is not so easy to stop laxatives, although the dose may be reduced. If they are taking an antidepressant for their IBS the patient may ask if they can stop this if they improve. This has to be done under medical supervision and only if the antidepressant is being taken for IBS rather than depression. This is often easier to achieve with a low dose tricyclic antidepressant rather than a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor.

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Example of a gut-focused hypnotherapy script for Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Close your eyes and let yourself drift off into a lovely relaxed state.

Nice and tranquil, nice and calm, nice and peaceful.

Your whole body relaxing, just going into a deep state of relaxation really tranquil, really calm, really relaxed.

Go as deep as you possibly can. the deeper you go the nicer you feel the nicer you feel the deeper you go every single muscle in your body relaxing just let yourself go deeper and deeper into this nice state where you are going to take control of everything just sit there and go as deep as you possibly can going deeper and deeper and deeper.

As that body of yours becomes exceptionally relaxed
so your mind becomes tranquil and calm and peaceful
a nice state of harmony between mind and body
everything working normally
everything as it should be
every system working perfectly
everything working in harmony
so just sit there feeling nice and healthy
nice and relaxed, nice and calm
and just go deeper and deeper and deeper
into this lovely state that is doing you so much good
and your mind feels lovely and tranquil
and calm and peaceful
feel that you've not a care in the world
a lovely tranquil calm mind
but at the same time that mind is becoming
more and more strong, more and more powerful,
more and more positive and determined
feel that strength being developed in your mind
your mind is becoming stronger and stronger and stronger
as you tap into all that potential energy in your mind
that you haven't used until now
feel that strength developing, feel that power developing
as you become more and more positive
and less and less negative
so you can control anything

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you can cope with anything
you can overcome anything
nothing is beyond your ability to control
feeling confident, strong, in control, secure,
feel really well, not a care in the world
Now I'd like you to turn that power of your mind
towards your tummy. On a count of 3
put a hand on your tummy and feel a lovely warm feeling in your tummy,
feel a surge of control coming over your tummy – 1,2,3.
Feel a lovely soothing feeling in your tummy,
as your mind takes control of your gut
feel every part of your gut being put under the control of your mind
no part of your gut can resist the power, the energy of your mind
as it gets stronger and stronger and stronger
feel your gut responding to the power of your mind
you are taking control of your gut
rather than your gut controlling you
and on a count of 3 put your other hand on your tummy
and double that sense of control - 1,2,3.
Feel that control just getting stronger and stronger and stronger
feel your gut responding to the power of your mind
no pain, no bloating, no discomfort
and even your bowel habit is gradually improving day by day
week by week month by month
you're just going to get better and better and better
failure is not on the agenda
you are going to get better
you are determined to get better
nothing is going to stop you from getting better
you are thoroughly fed up with this IBS
and once and for all you are going to put it behind you
so you are absolutely determined to get better
nothing is going to get in your way
so that for the rest of your life you can be free of this condition
and you can enjoy the rest of your life
so no pain, no bloating, no discomfort, no trouble with your guts
they just work quietly and normally and you can do what you want
without it affecting your guts
you won't need to worry about what you eat

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you won't have to worry about what you can and can't do
you'll just be able to do whatever you want to do
without your gut being upset
because you are taking control of your gut rather than your gut controlling you
you are fed up with being a slave to your gut
and you are going to turn the tables on your gut
and it is going to be a slave to you
do what you want it to do
and that is just to work nice and normally
in harmony with the rest of your body.
so just sit there getting better and better and better
and feel another nice surge of comfort coming out of your hands
as your tummy responds more and more to the power and energy
coming from your mind.
feel positive, feel strong, feel in control
feel a surge of well-being in your tummy
your tummy is going to become a source of pleasure to you
instead of a source of misery and discomfort
you may suffer set-backs
but they are not going to get you down
you are not going to let a set-back get you down
you'll just shrug it off
because you've shown that you can have good spells now
you're going to gradually extend those good spells
until the good spells exceed the bad spells
until they exceed them so much
that you only end up having the odd bad spell now and again
and even those you will be able to shrug off
so sit there, feeling that power getting stronger and stronger
and the energy in your mind becoming really, really powerful
your gut cannot resist that healing power of your mind
feel your gut just getting better, and better and better
feel it being soothed by your mind
a nice soothing feeling in your tummy
as it becomes less and less bloated and less
less uncomfortable and the bowel habit becomes normal
no pain, no bloating, no discomfort, no trouble with your bowels
and none of the other symptoms
that you can get with this problem

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you are going to feel more energetic
you are going to feel more full of life
you are going to feel generally much more healthy,
rejuvenated, invigorated and really healthy
sit there and feel thoroughly content and happy,
feel a sense of well being in every single part of your body
as your body becomes immensely healthy
as your mind becomes incredibly strong
It's so nice so have a strong powerful mind
a positive mind, with no negative thoughts
you are incapable of thinking negatively anymore
just feel good about having such a nice strong powerful mind
that enables you to cope with anything
to control anything, to deal with anything
you can cope with anything
you can control anything
you can overcome anything
you feel so good about yourself
make your mind get relentlessly stronger and stronger and stronger
more and more powerful,
more and more energetic
more and more positive
you are developing an incredibly strong mind
that has the capacity to cope with
and control anything
your tummy feels soothed
your tummy feels nice
your tummy is becoming a source of pleasure to you
instead of a source of misery
your gut is becoming more and more resistant
to being upset by anything
you can put a sort of shell around it
that protects it from anything
it's not going to be upset by anything
it's not going to be upset if something upsets you
you are getting stronger and stronger and stronger
feel that power developing in your mind
feel a surge of energy
feel that power being directed into your tummy right now

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putting your guts to rights
no pain, no bloating,
no trouble at all with your tummy
you are just getting better and better and better
nothing is going to get in your way
just feel really good.

For a while visualise your gut as a river
That is flowing easily, gently and smoothly
feel it becoming more and more normal
as you visualise it flowing effortlessly
just as you want it to flow
your bowel habit becoming more and more normal
just picture your gut getting better and better and better
visualise your gut in whatever way you want
getting better all the time
nothing is going to stop you getting better
you are absolutely determined to get better
nothing is going to stop you getting better
because you want to enjoy the rest of your life
you don't want to be a slave to your guts any more
you're thoroughly fed up with your gut problem
and once and for all, you'll be able to put it behind you
so you can enjoy the rest of your life
no more ifs or but's
you are going to get better
and soon you will be able to do whatever you want
without having to think about
whether it is going to upset your guts
you won't have to even consider the effects of anything on your guts
you're going to get better
so much that your gut won't trouble you anymore
it will just work quietly, comfortably and normally
without you knowing about it anymore
because you will be in control of your gut
rather than your gut in control of you
you are going to make your gut completely better
it will never rule your life again,
be determined to make it behave
be determined to get better

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so you can just thoroughly enjoy the rest of your life
you will have the odd set back
the odd bad day
but your gut can be normal for the majority of the time
and you are determined to make that happen
determined to get better
you will get better, you're going to get better
failure is not on the agenda
you are absolutely determined to get better
feel that strength of mind
feel that resolution to get better
you are positive that you are going to get better
nothing is going to get in your way
nothing is going to stop you
you want to get better
you're going to get better
you will get better
no pain, no bloating, no discomfort
and your bowel habit becoming more and more normal
and as a consequence of your guts working normally
you're just going to feel so much more healthy
you're whole being is going to feel healthy
every system in your body is going to work normally
every system in your body is going to work well
in harmony with every other system
you're just going to feel so, so healthy
so well, so strong and so in control
so sit there at peace with yourself
and with the world around you
with your mind getting stronger and stronger and stronger
and your tummy getting better and better and better
feel wonderful
it's so nice to be back in control of your life
it's a great feeling
it's great to have such strong mind
such a confident mind
such a secure mind
such a powerful mind
it's great to be positive about everything

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you're incapable of thinking negatively any more
you are becoming a really strong, confident, secure person
who can cope with anything,
who can control anything
you can overcome anything
nothing is going to get in your way
you are well and truly on the road to recovery now
and you can't wait to get completely well
but never, ever, let a set back get you down
you'll always come up the other side
don't let set backs get you down
because you get them now and again
but they are not going to stop you
from getting completely well again
so just sit there
feeling content
feeling calm
feeling peaceful,
feeling wonderful
and able to cope with anything
whatever life throws at you
you'll be able to deal with in the future
nothing is beyond your capacity to deal with or control
so sit there and go deeper and deeper and deeper
into this wonderful state of control
energy and power
you are invincible
nothing can get in your way of getting better now
so sit there feeling thoroughly content
thoroughly pleased with your progress
knowing you're going to get better
so in a moment or two I'm going to count to 5 and ask you to wake up.
When you wake up, you're going to feel
thoroughly refreshed, on top of the world
and you will continue to get better all the time
even when you're awake
you're going to continue to get better
hour by hour
day by day

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week by week
month by month
you're just going to get better and better and better
and every time you listen to your CD / listen to my voice
that will also make you get better and better and better
every time you listen to your CD / listen to my voice
you're just going to get better and better and better
nothing can get in your way now
you are on track to getting completely well again
Nothing, nothing is going to stop you,
you will not let anything get in your way
you are absolutely determined to get better
you are confident that you are going to get better
nothing can stop you now
feel wonderful,
feel strong,
feel in control
so on a count of 5, wide awake
refreshed
confident
secure
strong
positive and well and truly on the road to recovery
1,2,3,4,5 - wide awake